

## China joins global effort over pneumonia virus

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

The Chinese authorities have joined the global effort to discover the origin of the virus that has caused a worldwide epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). A team of investigators from the World Health Organization was allowed into Guangdong province last week to examine records of the cases that had occurred there and to meet health workers.

WHO now cites southern China as the place where the virus emerged. A spokesman for the WHO team said that the evidence they had gathered pointed to the coronavirus as the most likely cause of the outbreak but that it was too early to say if there was any link between animals and humans. The team concluded that the measures taken by the Guangdong authorities were satisfactory.

By 7 April China's health ministry had reported 1268 cases and 53 deaths, of which 1203 cases and 43 deaths were in Guangdong. Three foreigners contracted the disease in Guangdong, and a Finnish official from

the International Labour Organisation, Pekka Aro, died in Beijing.

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO's director general, has publicly criticised China for being slow in sharing information about SARS with the rest of the world. "It would have been much better if the Chinese government had been more open in the early stages," she said.

By 7 April, 2601 probable and suspected cases worldwide, including 98 deaths, had been reported to WHO in 18 countries.

On 2 April, WHO issued unprecedented travel advice, recommending that people postpone any planned trips to Hong Kong and Guangdong province. They cited concerns about the continued outbreak in Guangdong, the massive outbreak at Amoy Gardens—a private housing estate in Hong Kong—and the fact that some of the outbreaks in other countries could be traced back to businessmen who had visited Hong Kong and contracted the illness there.

Although WHO is not ruling out the possibility that SARS is airborne, it considers that the most likely means of transmission is droplet transmission and indirect contact. The WHO team in Hong Kong has been investigating how hundreds of residents, predominantly in one block, all contracted SARS at the same time. By 7 April, there



A China Eastern Airlines employee waits at Los Angeles international airport for incoming passengers from China

was no evidence of airborne transmission and the team was investigating the possibility of oral-faecal transmission.

Scientists in 12 laboratories and 10 companies around the world, coordinated by WHO, are still working to discover the exact identity and origin of the coronavirus believed to be the cause of the SARS epidemic. "We are still looking at the possibility of dual infection but with a full emphasis on producing a really reliable test based on the belief that the major causative agent is coronavirus," said Peter Cordingley, the WHO's

spokesman in Manila. Three tests are currently available, but none is conclusive.

Possible contributing factors include paramyxovirus and human metapneumovirus.

Hong Kong continues to battle with rising numbers of cases. By 7 April, there were 883 cases, with 23 deaths; 127 of the people infected had been discharged from hospital.

In Canada, SARS had claimed its tenth victim by 7 April, with 226 probable or suspected cases in total, predominantly in Ontario. (See p 825 and News Extra at [bmj.com](http://bmj.com).) □

## Commission warns against selling genetic tests direct to the public

Lynn Eaton *BMJ*

Genetic testing kits, which allow individuals to find out their long term risk of certain diseases, should not be sold direct to the public, the United Kingdom's Human Genetics Commission has recommended in a report to the government.

The growing number of tests available and the rapid technological developments in the area make it impossible to take an overall decision to accept the tests en masse, says the report. But it stops short of a complete ban on the kits.

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, who chairs the commission,

said she wanted people to be properly protected. "We believe the majority of genetic tests should be carried out under the supervision of a doctor within the NHS and that people need to think twice before paying money for something they may not need or understand.

"Modern genetics should not be misused commercially. Public information is vital and one good way to help people decide which genetic tests are suitable for them is to arm them with the facts."

The report recommends stricter controls on genetic testing to ensure that the tests are of

the highest quality and come with good customer support. It says the tests should be regulated to ensure they are suitable for the purpose they claim. The commission wants to discourage home testing or testing based on home sampling. Instead, it suggests, there should be a well resourced NHS genetics service that could manage access to any genetic tests deemed to be clinically relevant and useful.

The government will decide whether to accept their recommendation for a regulatory body and which organisation should have that role. Baroness Kennedy said it should not be the Human Genetics Commission, suggesting instead the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, the proposed new Human Tissue Authority, or the

UK Genetic Testing Network.

A consumer awareness campaign, with consumer organisations funded to provide impartial advice, is vital so that people can make informed choices, she added. Philip Webb, chairman of the working party that led the review, said the commission was concerned that otherwise people may be given misleading information.

"Predictive genetic tests performed without a medical consultation may provide false reassurance or cause unnecessary alarm to people," he said. "They could either delay seeking proper medical advice, make unnecessary lifestyle changes, or seek unnecessary medical treatment." □

For further information see [www.hgc.gov.uk/genesdirect/](http://www.hgc.gov.uk/genesdirect/)